
Book Review

Radford, L. & Hester, M. (2006). *Mothering through domestic violence*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Reviewed by Amy Chanmugam, Doctoral Candidate, MSSW, LCSW
The University of Texas at Austin

In this compelling paperback, Lorraine Radford and Marianne Hester seek to provide a wide audience with an overview of the rough terrain navigated by women who are mothers and who have experienced intimate partner violence (IPV). Their experiences with the state are described, in particular with family court systems and child protection systems. The book's central theme is that state practices often replicate abusive power and control dynamics previously exerted over IPV survivors. Quotes throughout the book allow readers to hear women's voices describing experiences of violence, mothering, state systems, and areas where these intersect. Being a mother is seen as a key factor in entrapment of women experiencing IPV because of "the fundamental contradiction between woman as mother and woman as lover in the social construction of western femininities." (Radford & Hester, 2006, p. 47).

The book, organized thematically, draws on six multi-method studies conducted by the authors, mostly in England. Hester is Professor of Gender, Violence and International Policy at the University of Bristol. Radford is Head of Research in the Child Protection Research Department of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in the UK. These employment arenas have approached issues of mothering and violence differently, and Radford and Hester have created a fruitful collaboration. Their six studies examined state practices as well as personal experiences of abuse, most with in-depth interviews. Two focused on women's experiences with post-separation child visitation arrangements. Participants included mothers, shelter advocates, attorneys, child protection staff and mediators. A third study was a "meta-evaluation" of 27 IPV initiatives in different communities led by multi-agency partnerships. A fourth (participatory action) study focused on how multiple agencies in one community coordinated responses to IPV, exploring experiences of 484 women and 171 service providers. A fifth study surveyed court professionals, and the sixth examined 267 child protection cases. Rather than focusing on each study in isolation, Radford and Hester briefly overview each, and then structure the book along themes appearing across studies. Chapter titles illustrate emergent themes: "Mother Blaming in the Courts" and "Walking on Eggshells..." Structuring thematically allows an integrative approach and opportunities for the authors to recommend remedies for dismantling harmful practices. Although the focus is on the UK, cases from around the world are discussed, providing a transnational perspective. U.S. issues described include the growing role of experts and assessment protocols in family courts, and the 1999 introduction of *The Greenbook Initiative*, which seeks to decrease contradictions among organizations involved with IPV.

The power state systems exert over mothers managing IPV (and over children resisting visitation with batterers) creates double-bind dilemmas as women seek safety for themselves and their children. Using the metaphor of three planets, Radford and Hester present vastly different approaches used to intervene with IPV survivors and their children by public child protection agencies, IPV advocates, and the courts. Each planet conceptualizes violence against women differently, with its own

“history, culture and laws” (Radford & Hester, 2006, p. 143). Their planet metaphor powerfully illustrates how different a woman’s situation can be depending on which planet she lands, and to which authority she is expected to conform. The experience of a woman situated in the middle of contradictory forces is made clear and is startling due to the complexity of the contradictions.

On the first of the three planets, IPV advocates and those in law enforcement conceptualize IPV as a gendered crime committed by male perpetrators. From this vantage point, a woman experiencing IPV is seen as a person in need of protection. On the second planet, the public child protection agency planet, the focus is on family pathology, and a mother experiencing IPV can be seen as culpable in exposing her children to violence and charged with failing to protect them. Notably, the data from Radford and Hester’s interviews indicate that protecting children from IPV is often foremost in mothers’ minds and drives their decision-making, consistent with other qualitative research (McGee, 2000). Women involved with child protection agencies lose autonomy over decision-making related to their children’s welfare, which can be experienced as similar to how they have been controlled in intimate relationships. Batterers often use the threat of harming or taking children to control women, and state workers may also tell mothers that their children will be removed from their care if they do not fulfill requirements. The mother may be receiving contradictory ultimatums from the batterer and the worker about a choice she should make, often to stop contact with the batterer, with both of them using power over the children to control her actions. The batterer may be threatening harm to the mother and children if she leaves, making his ultimatum more powerful, at the same time that the state system is holding her rather than him accountable for the family violence.

The third planet, the family court system, attempts to judge whether a man is a “good enough father” (Radford & Hester, 2006, p. 142) to make visitation and custody decisions. It is primarily concerned with women overcoming “their fears... rather than challenging the violence of men” (p. 101). A man who has abused his partner may still be considered a good enough parent. This planet emphasizes each parent’s relationship with her/his children, with preference for children maintaining both parental relationships. Radford and Hester view the dilemmas on this planet as especially problematic. After being urged to leave her abusive partner by those operating on the first two planets, a mother becoming involved with the family court system may be ordered the opposite: to maintain contact. A table provides 14 distinct examples of “How the family law reinforces the behavior of domestic violence perpetrators” (p. 105). Mothers describe instances in which their former partners deliberately, easily and successfully used the family court system to control and harass them. To give just two examples of the court replicating the dynamics of power and control present in IPV, by ordering the mother to make her child have contact with the batterer against the child’s wishes, the court can interfere in the mother-child relationship as the batterer does, by damaging their emotional bond. Second, batterers’ repeated litigation can harass women and control their finances and time.

A limitation of the book, which aims to keep power relations central, is lack of details on research methodology. It is not possible to discern the extent to which the experiences of women of color, or women of varied income levels, are included. At times individual quotations situate the speaker in terms of immigration status and race, but on a thematic level, the experiences of women of color are not delineated. Integration of these issues into the overall themes, and description of who comprised study samples, would be of interest. Women of color encounter further complexities in their experiences of IPV, and an added set of power dynamics in interactions with state systems, as illustrated for example in Bernard’s (2001) qualitative interviews with black mothers in the UK whose children had been sexually abused. The lack of methodological detail is a disappointment to researchers who want to pursue similar lines of inquiry. The lack of exploration of variables related to

social location is even more concerning, because they result in a somewhat homogenized description of state practices with women mothering through IPV, while more varied experiences likely exist.

In spite of these weaknesses, the book is useful for scholars and a must-read for anyone working directly with women mothering through IPV. Social workers involved in child welfare practice, victims' services, legal aid or the battered women's movement may be intrigued by the portrayal of the system they are most familiar with, and they will certainly gain insight into the other "planets." The book may serve as foundation for lively debate across service areas about best practices with families experiencing IPV. Researchers will benefit from the overview of varied approaches and from the collaboration across traditionally disconnected fields modeled by Radford and Hester. *Mothering through Domestic Violence* contributes to filling a conceptual gap identified by Krane and Davies (2002). As part of their study of practices with mothers in a Canadian shelter, they critiqued feminist scholarship, finding that feminist analyses of mothering lacked discussions of intimate violence, and that mothering was "invisible" in anti-violence advocacy and shelter practices.

The book has particular relevance for those involved with community and state organizations. Community-level change is needed. One system cannot improve in isolation from another, and the authors challenge organizations to work in partnership. Earlier research by Radford and Hester has been used to dismantle abusive policies in England, being cited in court cases and in legislation addressing unsafe professional interventions. Social workers are uniquely qualified to accept the challenge to improve community collaborations with our strengths-focus, training in the ecological perspective, and skills in advocacy, group facilitation and community organizing.

The book meets its goal of planting seeds to "raise worthwhile debate and make some contribution, no matter how small, to challenging the labeling as inadequate parents of women who mother through domestic violence" (Radford & Hester, 2006, p.16). Their critical review nutshells fundamental questions about inherent contradictions operating in state practices: Can a man be a violent partner and also a good enough father? Can a system blame a mother and still act to support her? Sufficient international examples demonstrate the book's relevance beyond the UK. The three planets metaphor is supported, and provides an organizing framework for the key theme: mothers' experiences of state practices mirror their experiences in abusive intimate relationships. Those working in any arena to end violence in the lives of women or protect the interests of children must understand the interplay of systems impacting women, IPV, and mothering.

References

- Bernard, C. (2001). *Constructing lived experiences: Representations of black mothers in child sexual abuse discourses*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing.
- Krane, J. & Davies, L. (2002). Sisterhood is not enough: The invisibility of mothering in shelter practice with battered women. *Affilia*, 17 (2), 167-190.
- McGee, C. (2000). *Childhood experiences of domestic violence*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Radford, L. & Hester, M. (2006). *Mothering through domestic violence*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.